



Sealaska Heritage Institute

One Sealaska Plaza, Suite 301 • Juneau • Alaska • 99801-1249 • (907) 463-4844

www.sealaskaheritage.org • www.alaskanativeartists.com • Fax (907) 586-9293

March 26, 2014

Re: Support for House Bill 216 Official Languages of the State

To Whom It May Concern:

Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) strongly supports the House Bill 216 recognizing all Alaska Native Languages as official languages. The adoption of this legislation sends a powerful message that Alaska Native languages are valued and equally to English in the State of Alaska.

Nearly all twenty of Alaska's indigenous languages are identified as critically or severely endangered by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endangered languages listing. The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian languages are no exception. With each obituary, we mourn the loss of an elder and another fluent speaker.

Native languages contain intellectual wealth accumulated through thousands upon thousands of years. They convey how Alaska Native people view and use the land. SHI recently published the most extensive cultural atlas of Southeast Alaska: "*Haa Léelk'w Hás Aaní Saax'u, Our Grandparents' Names on the Land*", edited by Thomas Thornton. This atlas contains thousands of indigenous place names of Southeast Alaska. These names, more than anything, remind all of us that this is truly *Haa Aaní*, our land. If this is truly our land, then maybe we should all know something about the languages of our land.

We believe that the collective wisdom of our ancestors and the beauty of culture hold our promise for the future. We firmly believe that Alaska Native students who know and accept who they are, even in the context of living in a society that devalues Native-ness or cultural and physical differences, will succeed academically, emotionally and socially. The transmission of our culture and language is the key to our survival and success. Moreover, we believe that one of the greatest richness of this State is represented by its cultural and linguistic diversity, and we must ensure that this remains a characteristic of the state of Alaska.

Passing of HB 216 supports and encourages the indigenous peoples of Alaska to be strong, educated, contributing members of their communities. Acknowledgement of the value of Alaska Native languages in the State of Alaska Constitution is a huge, historic and wonderful accomplishment. We need more awareness, support and recognition of the value of Native language revitalization.

We wish to express our gratitude to you for carrying forth legislation supporting the indigenous language speakers of the state of Alaska.

Sincerely,

Rosita Worl, Ph.D.
President